In the Shadow of Suns and Kings

by Jonathan Olvera

Dedicated to Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici, and to all who served the good and truth-filled cause, in labor, in light, and in exile.

The sea was cold beneath the wooden hull of the royal galley, but colder still were the chains that bound Jonathan Olvera to the shadows. Saltwater soaked his cuffs. A lantern swayed overhead, casting prison bars of light across his face. He was not a criminal, but his thoughts had been deemed dangerous—too dangerous to be free. Thoughts of liberty, of calendars not drawn by the Church, of men not measured by gold or crown.

They called him **Aloe Vera**—first as mockery for the healing tinctures he offered to seasick deckhands, and later with reverence. Word had spread of his calm defiance, of the way he spoke of stars and silence like scriptures. His punishment had been issued directly by the ruling monarch: he was to serve under **Galileo Galilei**, the Crown's most precious heretic—brilliant, but watched.

Jonathan was dragged across Europe in silence, under guard, into Florence where Galileo's observatory stood like a monument to forbidden light. There, in the hills beyond the shadow of Rome's cathedral towers, the young man labored under the sun and studied by night. Galileo rarely spoke except when the stars demanded it.

"You are not here to worship kings," the old astronomer said once, brushing dust off a brass sextant. "You are here to understand what even kings cannot stop—**motion**."

Jonathan listened closely, just as he always had. Life had taught him to listen. To obey the rhythm of nature. And yet, he had always known that obedience alone would not be enough. There had to be something more—something useful.

He remembered:

> *When I was a young man, growing into adulthood—or so I thought I was—I had very many challenges. I wasn't challenged physically like many people are with immediate violence.*
>
> *Life is a long journey—is it a journey we have to experience? Is it a duty to serve another?*
>
> *My interpretation of life: I wanted it to be useful.*
>
> *I spent many days and years looking into my memories of distant past—colorful.*

If this life was a temple—and some are sure that it is—it would be decorated with the acts of hard-working people, the fruits of distant lands, the heat of the Sun.

Ellipses—shades and hard rules.

Learning many things—I always thought to listen and pay very much attention—the sun always caught my attention, and so did many other bodies in the sky.

They seemed to speak. They seemed to beckon—the glimmers and the passages of the Earthly Kingdom, they echoed in synchrony.

The Earth cried and burned. It flooded.

I could see that work was good—I could see myself working dutifully—keeping note of the sun, the bodies in the sky, the need for men to work—collect water, make food, and fair trade.

It was something that I had to do—I was charged with this responsibility. I had to make an advance, and I would succeed.

My life depended on it.

Jonathan served Galileo with exactness, translating observations, refining star charts, and keeping track of planetary alignments. But in the quiet hours between dusk and midnight, he wrote. He called them the *Letters from the Root*, sealed with a hand-carved sigil—an aloe stalk under a crescent moon. These letters were sent by bread peddlers, desert traders, and fringe believers to outposts across the Mediterranean and beyond.

“I do not seek to rule,” he wrote in one, “but to **record**. To count the will of the people like stars—each one shining with its own truth, burning not for permission, but because it must.”

The letters reached the wrong ears.

One morning, soldiers arrived in the observatory tower with an edict in wax and iron.

“By decree of King Mosiah,” one announced, “Jonathan Olvera, also known as Aloe Vera, is sentenced to exile in Desolation—the southern lands beyond the frontier. You will leave before sundown.”

Jonathan turned to Galileo, who offered him only a cracked lens.

“Truth burns brightest where there is no shade,” the old man whispered.

The journey to Desolation took thirteen days. The air was thick with sand and judgment. The land was bare, cursed, and holy all at once. There were ruins of

temples long buried, paths walked by wandering prophets, and stones still stained by forgotten wars.

But Jonathan did not die there.

He built.

First with his hands: mud bricks, water traps, sundials, sun-tempered ovens. Then with his mind: agreements marked not by blood, but by handprint and honor. He called them **Covenants of Labor**—a new form of currency rooted in trust. A market formed. So did a community.

The exiles began to refer to their growing outpost not as a prison, but as a garden. They named it **Aloe**, after the man who had made it livable. He refused the title of leader and instead carved their promises into stone, into soil, and into sky.

“I don’t rule,” he told a visiting emissary. “I witness.”

“You dare challenge the divine order of King Mosiah?”

“I don’t challenge him. I reflect him—**through the lens of the people.**”

Over time, Aloe became not just a place but a principle. Mormons began copying the structure of covenant commerce. Chinese traders brought gifts of paper and ink to formalize the labor tallies. Even some of the King’s own advisors began writing to Aloe in secret, requesting guidance on grain storage and water regulation.

Still, Jonathan remained a student—not of politics, but of stars.

In the final years of his life, he returned to the first sundial he had built outside his tent in Desolation. The lines had worn away, but the idea had not.

“If life is a temple,” he whispered, “then may its foundation be justice. May its walls be labor. May its roof be stars.”

And as the wind passed through the aloe groves planted by hand, Jonathan smiled. He had not built a kingdom. He had remembered a future.